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CHARLES ELIOT NORTON: A REMINISCENCE

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

It may be said at once that the authors of the biographical comment on the *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*¹ have done their part with taste and discretion. I have no means of knowing how they shared the work between them, but I imagine that a large part of the comment was written by Miss Norton. What I know is that the work is always so done as to place the structural facts before the reader with entire clearness, and leave him in possession of them unhampered by supposition or conjecture. The admirable effect is to allow the letters to tell the story, which is of the slightness characteristic of the lives of scholars. It is only when a scholar struggles for life as well as for letters that the incidents of his struggle have the poignant interest of those in the careers of other notable men: men of the world, and not of the study. The career of Norton had no such incidents; life and letters came smoothly to him by an inherited ease of condition and a birthright of learning. If there were any American purple, one might say he was born in the purple; as it is one may say he was born in the fine linen, the finest of our American weave and fiber, the lawn of the New England minister's Genevan bands. More than almost any other prominent New-Englander he was of the Brahminical caste, and was marked equally by the Calvinistic severity of his remotest Puritanic ancestor, the Rev. John Norton of Hingham, and by the Unitarian lenity of his immediate ancestor, the Rev. Andrews Norton of the Harvard Divinity School. Their blend became in him a moral

¹ *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*. With Biographical Comment by his Daughter, Sara Norton, and M. A. de Wolfe Howe. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

force making for civic righteousness and an esthetic conscience endeavoring as unbrokenly for the elevation and direction of art in all its phases among us. The strain of poetry, delicate, pure, in the devotional verse of his father, so almost entirely ceased in the son that it is with a sort of incredulity one comes upon a few of his graceful lines in this record. From the first he gave himself to learning; at the very first, when the child's intelligence began to stir in him, he had the quaint ambition of editing his father's sermons. But when the earlier learning-years were past, and the working-years were immediately before him, it was quite by his choice, if not altogether his desire, that he took his part in practical affairs. That is, after a certain amount of office work, he went out supercargo to India, as the custom was for well-qualified or well-friended Bostonians in the eighteen-thirties and forties, when the deep-sea commerce of the port was a condition and not a tradition of great prosperity.

But if business is war, his experience of it did not silence his devotion to letters. In the midst of it he writes home to his family of what he sees in the same mood as he wrote his *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* long after he had laid down the arms of the commercial recruit. Business had been his choice for the time, but he was dedicated by nature and culture to that sort of censorship which after his return home became his office to the end of his days. There were summer changes of place, earlier to Newport and later to Ashfield. There were sojourns abroad, pretty well everywhere on the continent, but mainly in Italy, and almost equally in England; France and Germany appealed indefinitely less to him and left scarcely a trace upon his work. But with all these journeys and sojourns, there is a sense of his permanence in Cambridge. He married and his happy married life began there in the gentle old house where his life began. His children grew about him; then in one of their sojourns in Europe his wife died. He came home to Shady Hill and there, with the long summers at Ashfield and some brief visits to England, he aged slowly in his not essentially varied occupations of editorship, authorship, and professorship till after the ample leisure from them which he took, he died where he was born, like Lowell, the earliest loved among the men dear to him.

In these letters to such a variety of friends as few men

have made of their acquaintance, there is an extraordinary equality from first to last. They keep from first to last the youthful affection which their appeal grows almost impatiently into. Whatever interest is in hand it becomes under his touch a tie of amity between him and each of his correspondents, and he does not seek to bind one more than another. The reader will not fail to note how almost unfailingly the letters are not only expressions of affection for his correspondent, but are like the older fashion of letters in being report and debate of the world's affairs, letters, politics, morals. They address themselves to very many of the most important and best-known men of our two countries of America and England on these terms; but to some obscurer yet not less important man they will have the same reach beyond the personal to the human interests. He could not sit down to talk with another, whether by the spoken or written word, without wishing to talk seriously, and he would make occasion for this, if he did not find it, though so much a man of the world as he would not force the talk beyond smallness if that were the measure of his interlocutor, but he would then make it brief as well as small. Some of his correspondents are dearer friends than others, but his constancy is the same for all; and his goodwill is promptly responsive to the good work of the obscurest beginner. Him, too, he tries to make his friend, his lover, and not for the time, but with enduring faithfulness to the bond established by his own kindness.

His letters express his nature better than any comment could, and it would not be useful to repeat from them in other terms the story of his life. But I should like to tell the story of my own acquaintance which his most hospitable spirit turned to friendship with him. It began more than fifty years ago with our meeting at the house of a friend to both in New York, when it appeared that he had been a lenient reader of those letters from Venice to the *Boston Advertiser* which were made soon afterward into *Venetian Life*, and the talk was lighted with the glow of love for Italy which was then so genial in Cambridge people. I knew him only as Lowell's associate in the editorship of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, but he suffered my young ignorance of his distinctive qualities with a patience which might well have been slightly ironical. When a few months later I went to live in Boston I found that my ignorance was not

remembered against me. It was thought that I had best understand living in Boston as living in Cambridge for the greater advantage of my subeditorial work on the *Atlantic Monthly*; and Norton with his whole household joined in the search which developed the fact that there was not a house for me to be had in the whole university town. The era of expansion had not yet come to a place so temperamentally self-contained, though the great Civil War had been fought to the final effect of overbuilding everywhere else. For want of a roof over our heads in Cambridge we remained domiciled in Boston with a landlady whose enterprises extended to the quiescent real estate beyond the Charles. She had found a small house which she was beating down in price that she might buy it and sell it again at a price to be promptly put up; but the negotiations lagged. When Norton knew of the affair he said that he would put me in the way of buying it from the actual owner, and that he should have a particular pleasure in balking the deal. He indorsed my note on a second mortgage, and I took possession of the house which his help and the law's kindly fiction enabled me to feel I owned.

I suppose that with due reservations Norton liked my way of writing, but I think that I was personally acceptable to him and his when we became neighbors because I was still involved in that afterglow of Italy which I hope will never quite fade from my life. The moment was indeed superlatively fortunate for such a youthful Italianate as I, because it was the moment when Longfellow was submitting his translation of the "Divine Comedy" to the criticism of his friends, and I, unworthy, was counted among them. Norton, as I have elsewhere told, was of the chiefest and wisest; and when the last canto of the "Paradiso" had been read before them, and the last supper eaten, it was for every reason consoling to know that he was about undertaking a version of the "Vita Nuova." In his house at Shady Hill the criticisms and suppers were continued the following winter, and the sense of them is mystically mixed in me with that of the ghostly snows and moonless thaws through which one penetrated to the brightness and the cheer indoors. The paths that led to the friendly house were already known to me, but I had not learned to know them well before the family was away for the summer to Ashfield, and I frequented it most in the winters which still prevail in my re-

membrance of it. Our own little pine box on the neighboring lane, and the Venetian palace we had so recently exchanged for it, were not less modern in some things. There was a furnace, but to the last there was neither gas nor electricity in the house at Shady Hill. A large moderator lamp, student lamps, and candles supplied the lighting, and the heating was mainly from the fires on the hearths. The most constant and abundant of these was that which warmed the large oblong study, where the books ranked from floor to ceiling on the eastern wall helped the pines without to keep the place against the cold. At the southern end of the room long windows opened to the floor; the northern reach of it was commonly shut off with its less used books and its table of prints and maps. Deep arm-chairs faced the fire; between it and the northward wall of books stretched the study-table with its orderly array of stationery and the latest books and such weekly reviews as *The Spectator* and *The Nation*, if there are other such. A very few pictures were hinged against the shelves of books; at the right of the fire the amplest wall space was filled by a rich canvas of Tintoretto. Here our critical circle had its meetings; and here, during the forty or fifty years that I knew him, at irregular but gradually lengthening intervals I saw the scholar who had known how to endear himself to my shyness by such graces of mind and heart as I have known in no other. In the evening there was the soft brightness of the lamp, and the cheer of guests and kindred; it was mostly the family, nearer and farther, that filled it with presences that one after another became absences. But somehow I associate the man and place with the light of the afternoons in which the fires of the hearth were paler than at night. It seems to me that this was his most characteristic time; it was still morning with me when he began to welcome me there, but it was already early afternoon with him; and at last it was the hour "between the dark and the daylight." He was never quite a young man to my sense, and from first to last I see him sitting in his deep chair before the fire, listening willingly, talking willingly, and tempering my own mostly too eager modernness with a sort of dissenting sympathy.

I shall not be able to recall incidents; there were not many incidents, and I am afraid that what I shall be able to offer in characterization of him cannot be consecutive and will

not be definite. But I remember that when he came home after that long absence in Europe, with his life broken in two, and the half only left him to make of it what he could on earth, there was a distinct change in his religious belief; in his religion there was none and never could be, because religion was his nature, whatever he believed that he believed. When I first began to know him he had not yet left the old moorings of his faith; but held that Christianity dwelt in the four gospels and not satisfyingly elsewhere in the Bible. Now, I learned that he no longer accepted the Christianity of the four gospels. A few years later when we were once going up to Ashfield together we had a long talk about the old undying question, whether if a man died he should live again. He said that our notion of a future life was mainly from the Greeks who, rightly seeing in themselves such power and splendor of intellect, could not believe themselves of the same make as the beasts that perish, and out of this negation grew the affirmation of their immortality. He fully recognized the great civilizing and humanizing influence which this belief had been, in consenting that its rejection by mankind might mean a deluge of immorality sweeping the world under it; but at every risk and at every cost, he stood for the truth. Then again, after many years, I was once with him in his study, in the light of some pale afternoon, when he said, wearily, that he wished men could drop the whole affair, that since they never had found out and never could find out about it they would cease the useless and hopeless quest. He spoke severely, impatiently, as a man does when he condemns in himself the vice which he knows he shares with others.

But his make was essentially religious, Biblical, Puritanical, and, however he would have imagined himself Hellenic, he was in his heart Hebraic. That is, when he thought he was supremely loving beauty, he was supremely loving duty, the truth which is in beauty, and is inseparably one with it. We none of us make ourselves quite clear to others, however clear we are to ourselves, so when Norton in teaching about art seemed of necessity to renounce modern art, especially American art, he was keeping a reserve of kindness for its possibilities, which he would most gladly enlarge to any hopeful instance of it, any expression of the spiritual beauty of art. At first hand I know nothing of his relations to the Harvard students whose devotion made him

for twenty-five years the most conspicuous and influential of Harvard teachers. His point of view could not fail to be failed of by many; the many who did not fail of it altogether could not seize it perfectly. I fancy this may have been quite the case with those who meant to make practical use of his instruction, and not merely to avail themselves of so much culture as they should find in it. But the students who rebelled against the unsparing idealism could when they did something ideally good, be sure of his praise. They might talk violently against his precept, but if their practice paralleled it they could the more rejoice. I venture to think that his defect as a critic lay in his quality of prophet. From what he knew of past conditions and what he knew of present conditions he predicted the future; but no man can safely do that. This affected his vast influence when the student came to live by his doctrine; in generals his teaching might seem to inculcate despair, but when it came to particulars he was an unsurpassed critic. I can affirm this from my own experience. Instinctively I would have forbore to ask his advice about what I meant to do; but I went to him once with a thing I had done, my paper on Lowell, namely. He said it was a collection of sketches and not a portrait; he was kind enough to the sketches, but somehow they must be pulled together; then I wrote a final paragraph which I hoped and which he said did the work; and I have always felt myself indebted for his censure which made me save the day. But I remember another criticism of his which in a generality did the effect of a specific instance. I was once so taken with the poetic realism of Crabbe's *Tales* that I fancied doing some like studies of American life. Norton predicted that I could not because of the thinness, the poverty of the American background; and my experiment found it so.

Throughout my witness of his life, which was not constant, and I do not suppose was more intelligent than constant, I was often surprised by that specific hopefulness underlying his general despair. He would lament the state of our literature, but no man would greet more eagerly, more liberally any token of life, any fresh promise of beauty in it. His No, which came first, was qualified by the latent Yes which it was so apt to spell in the exceptional instances. It was not easy to hold out against him if he did not like the thing you liked and were defending; and he

could be very penetratingly insistent when he wanted to make you think with him.

He was very inflexible concerning principles; he would have none of my doctrine that in equality was the only social righteousness and happiness; and I felt that in his relentless difference from me he was putting a strain on his unbroken kindness, which was all it could bear. I am not saying or meaning that he was an aristocrat, or was so much "a Tory in his nerves" as Lowell. With less profession of democracy he was quite as near a realization of it; he could not so much as Lowell love the common or commoner man for his humorous originality, but he could as truly fellowship what was good in him. I cannot claim that I knew him very well on this side, but it appeared to me that there was light on it in the passionate regret with which a very common man spoke of his death to me on the sunny bench in the Public Garden the day after he died. I wish I could remember the words; they implied and revealed a brotherly relation to such men which I had not imagined of him. Such men, common men, are not so hard to be brother to as those poor in taste whom we call vulgar; yet even with these he could be tender, as he could also be severe where severity was better for them. I suppose if it had ever come to a definition of the disappointment with America which he undoubtedly felt, and had sore cause to feel, he would have blamed the vulgar and not the common for it; for the common there was always hope and future; for the vulgar none. I am not offering these as his words or his ideas, and I should not feel justified in attributing to him a preference for any order of things above ours. Of all other orders he praised the English order most; he was often lifted by a high enthusiasm for its possibilities of good. His friendship with the best sort of Englishman kept his love of their order alive, yet once when he had spoken glowingly of England and I asked him, "Well, after all, if you could change, would you rather have been an Englishman than an American?" he answered, "No, if I could choose I would rather have been American," as if here was still the world's home of Opportunity. In a letter to that very remarkable student of our life, J. B. Harrison, whom Norton loved and befriended as long as he lived, he wrote:

I agree with your view of the character of our people, but it makes me less despondent than it seems to make you. I do not wonder at their

triviality, their shallowness, their materialism. I rather wonder that, considering their evolution and actual circumstances, they are not worse. Here are sixty or seventy millions of people of whom all but a comparatively small fraction have come up, within two or three generations, from the lower orders of society. They belong by descent to the oppressed from the beginning of history, to the ignorant, to the servile class or to the peasantry. They have no traditions of intellectual life, no power of sustained thought, no developed reasoning faculty. But they constitute on the whole as good a community on a large scale as the world has ever seen. Low as their standards may be, yet taken in the mass they are higher than so many millions of men ever previously attained. They are seeking material comfort in a brutal way, and securing in large measure what they seek, but they are not inclined to open robbery or cruel extortion. On the whole they mean "to do about right." I marvel at their self-restraint. That they are getting themselves and us all into dangerous difficulties is clear, but I believe they will somehow, with a good deal of needless suffering, continue to stumble along without great catastrophe.

He saw the America of his ideal still practicable, and however she disappointed him, he could not leave to love her, though doubtless if she could have been sensibly personified to him he would have told her some home truths that would have done her good. His greatest disappointment of all was the outbreak of the War with Spain, which he regarded as a denial of the faith that had been in us, and a return to the barbarism of violence, an abandonment of our moral primacy among the nations, and a devotion of our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor to a needless conflict. He did not forbear an instant expression of abhorrence, or later a more studied expression of his condemnation; and he took not without pain, but not also not without a smile of contempt, the brutal obloquy which followed from the chauvanism then imagining itself patriotism, and assuming the office of judge and executioner toward those of different feeling or thinking. In his position concerning that war he was consistent with his life-long thinking and feeling concerning all wars, and especially American wars. Until I read some letters here printed I had not supposed in him the constant detestation of slavery which they reveal and the eagerness with which he joined in the first practicable resistance of its aggressions; I should rather, from his social conditioning, have imagined in him the fine old Whiggery of the best Boston families which outlived itself in useless endeavors to reconcile right and wrong. But these letters glow with generous enthusiasm for the right and class him with such thorough-going patriots as Lowell and the other great New-England-

ers who foresaw that they must needs oppose the pro-slavery policy to the death. They all hated war as much as they hated slavery, but when the war against slavery came they hallowed it in their hearts and souls.

I am not sure whether Norton ever doubted its holiness; but I fancy that in proportion to his reverence for the Civil War was his repugnance for the Spanish War. I, too, detested the Spanish War, for the same reasons as I thought his, and for those reasons I detested even more the far wickeder Boer War waged by the mightiest Empire in the world against two little Republics in its greed for their gold. I chanced to be at Norton's house when the news of the final great reverse of the Boers came, and to my stupefaction I heard him accepting it as the best thing that could happen. I never quite understood the logic of his preference, and I cannot say now whether he thought it better for the Empire to win sooner, because in the unequal struggle the Republics must sooner or later lose, and it was always well to stop bloodshed; or whether he believed the Empire had the juster cause and ought to win; or whether, as between England and any people but ourselves, his heart must be with England, though I do not believe his head would.

Norton was in most things so entirely reasonable, so sane, so just, that I am not sure but I have an unworthy satisfaction in noting this exception to his prevalent mood. My sense of an instance so concrete enables me to realize that through some such aberration from the severe logic of his life he could forgive illogicalities in me. I remember with what a smiling desperation he heard me say that I was going to vote for Blaine when he and most others of the best men I knew were going to vote for Cleveland. To the last I suspect that he had to forgive in me deflections from the notion he had formed of me. Every year, as I hope I may say without unseemly boasting, his affection had grown more demonstrative. I was the latest if least citizen of the world which he had known for great and beautiful, that wonderful Cambridge world of poets and scholars which many centuries will not see again. What part of it he had been himself I must let Time, which has all eternity for it, decide; but what he was he had largely made himself by his affection for his fellow-men, or, more specifically, his fellow literary men.

In him I long saw the last of the great group of Cambridge men whom I was privileged to know almost in their prime, or a little past it when humanity is in its autumnal richness and ripeness. In my mid-Western remoteness I knew these men only very dimly before it was my good fortune to be among them as I never could be of them. I did not well imagine them there, qualitatively or quantitatively, or scarcely afterward in my Venetian remoteness. The man whom I was destined to see survive them all was, as I have owned, not of my surmise even when I had come to live in New York, and I was to feel his unstinted kindness much before I could appreciate his wisdom. He loved that beautiful and righteous world in which he dwelt; he truly measured it in all its dimensions, and in his tender memories of it he did not exaggerate its importance. He had known more intimately than any of the others the English world of poets and scholars, and I am sensible now of delicate cautions rather than criticisms which from the first might well have been for the instruction of my enthusiasm. But this beautiful and righteous world was his home, and they who shared it with him were his kindred. He was the youngest of the group; the years counted ten between him and Lowell, and twenty between him and Longfellow; after they were gone he grew into contemporaneity with them, and then into a seniority which could judge them paternally, as the present can always judge the past. But in him, beyond other men, the child was father of the man, and his relation to his fellow-citizens of that ideal commonwealth was filial as well as paternal. I think that his sense was not only the just measure of it, but was also the perception of its significance in contrast with the vast, sprawling, unwieldy Republic of Letters and Laws which has replaced it. He would not, perhaps, and perhaps he could not, for many reasons, fully impart the image of it which was in his mind; but all the same it is a pity, whether he would not or could not.

He was an idealist whom his strong common sense bound to daily duty. With that dialectic of despair which many mistakenly imagined was his working hypothesis, he had a practical wisdom which was radiant with welcome for any good thing done or said. Although he had been so often disappointed, I do not believe he ever ceased to expect beautiful and true things from the

future which he was so apt to deny any promise. I suppose he mainly had his pleasure in the past, but even there he was not self-indulgent, and would have owned that the conditioning of its beauty and even its goodness was often hideous. I never heard him dwell upon any time of it with the affection which he once showed in speaking of that joyous time in New England between the first and third quarters of the nineteenth century when life wore such a hopeful look for all sorts and conditions of men, and even women, that the millennium was more imaginable than it ever was before or has been since. He painted the hopeful mood of that time with a tenderness which his smile for its fatuity did not mock; he rather held it dearer for that, like the error of a child dreaming the world as wholly beautiful and good as it looked on some June morning. His words cannot be reported now, and I wish he had set them down himself. Then from his perfect understanding of New England idealism we should understand how ideally of New England he was. No one else could make us understand that.

He was himself the expression, the impersonation of its most hospitable spirit. He never failed to meet the friends to whom he had once given his love and trust with the same welcoming smile as at the first giving. His love and trust had not to be conquered from him; they were given, if given at all, eagerly, and never, unless for cause reluctantly recognized, withdrawn. In this spontaneity, this impulsiveness (a word that will seem strange concerning him to a very common mistakenness) he remained young; but I saw him grow into the outward likeness of an old man, a little more bent, year by year, but resolutely keeping his delicate frame to its work by the strength of what I suppose he would not have allowed me to call his soul, and so I will say, by the strength of his unaging mind. He was, like Lowell, loath to grow old, not like Lowell, humorously, boyishly, but very seriously, and anxious to guard himself from senile severity in his judgments. "I hope I don't say this because I am getting old," he once said in condemning some odious new aspect of our American life. When he resigned his chair in Harvard, he had arrived at that time of life when he would willingly rest and he enjoyed with amusement the spectacle of my continued activities. I said that the notion of leaving off work dismayed me, and "Oh, you will come to it," he answered, smiling and drawing through his fine

scholar-hand the velvety ears of the dachshund on his knee.

It was one of those sunny afternoons of spring or of fall, which are sometimes so alike in their tender light, when in my comings and goings through Boston I could run out to Cambridge for an hour's talk over the state of the New York literary world as I knew it from my proximity to authors and editors. He still kept an open mind for the improbable possibilities of good work in any art, and he took the interest of abiding youth in anything well done, or even only promisingly done. I suppose most people would not call him an optimist or me a pessimist, but I believe that he liked more of the recent things than I did, and though he was ten years older than I, he was, by his birthright from that ever-youthful New England of his nativity, a younger man. We talked that afternoon in the cool light of the vernal or autumnal day, with the fire on his hearth paling under it, and I should like to leave him in it there, among his pictures and his books, the equal lover of all the beautiful arts.

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.